

Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day: Beginning Fugues

We begin with a subject, say, the first phrase of a favorite hymn. The right hand plays the tune, ok, so far, so good, now the left imitates, umm, somewhere lower. Right hand continues with something that sounds eerily like the next phrase of the hymn. I didn't mean it, it just happened. Uh-oh, time for the third entry, better get some pedal action going here. Oh no, I find myself just playing the hymn again. What is all this homophony happening around me? Why can't I make a fugue?! Why does everything I improvise revert to a hymn?!

Sound familiar? It's a dilemma I've faced so often, I actually have a cure.

Tip #1: start with the left hand, in the tenor register. That way, when the second voice enters, you'll be less likely to be pulled into the habit of continuing the hymn, and more likely to focus on harmonizing the subject in the dominant key.

Tip #2: limit yourself to 3 voices: left hand, right hand, pedal. This economy will lead you to think contrapuntally, and help avoid the melody/harmony mindset in the first paragraph.

Tip #3: practice the second entry first. Play the subject in the dominant key, in the right hand. Then harmonize that with the left hand, one note at a time, using mostly thirds and sixths.

Fugal expositions are largely about the tension between tonic and dominant. This is why, if a subject moves from tonic to dominant, then the answer will move from dominant to tonic, even if a note has to be adjusted here or there. This will be a tonal (as opposed to a real) answer, i.e., an answer in the tonic key. But let's not clutter the issue too much. A subject that firmly defines the tonic, followed by an answer that firmly defines the dominant, will set you off on the right foot, so to speak.

Let's take the opening phrase of *Liebster Jesu* for our subject. Of course, you can make up a subject yourself. Just be sure it firmly defines the home key. You can make a fugue out of anything, of course, but life is hard already. Our subject, starting in the left hand:



Our answer, in the right hand:



Start practicing by harmonizing this second entry with a melody in the left hand. How to make that melody? Parallel thirds are good, sixths good, tenths good, contrary motion good. Remember, you're in the key of D here, so use C-sharps!

Another tip for making good counterpoint: keep each voice in its own playpen on the keyboard; avoid letting one violate the other's space. You'll accomplish this if you're strict about keeping one voice per hand: thumbs don't like having to cross.



When you can do this easily, practice harmonizing the pedal entry:



Be strict about accompanying this pedal entry with only two notes, one in each hand. Also, play as *few* notes as possible. Too much motion in the accompanying voices only detracts from the subject. Holding one while the other moves – good! You can think of these two measures as being in either D major or G major.

Tip #4: Remember your best solution, and repeat it. Improvising is not about generating more and more original ideas. It's more about creating beauty by making sense.

Then consider for a moment what happens next. We're playing 3 voices, holding an A in the pedal, and we need to move toward a cadence in G. Think V-I in G, which means you have to move through D. The cadence should happen on a strong beat. That means beat 1 or beat 3. Sounds obvious, but this is an easy place to get lost. I myself need to count out loud to avoid meandering.

Now that you've practiced these little sections, you are ready for the big reward: you get to start your piece from the beginning! It helps at this point to have a framework to look at, so you know where to shift your focus. I often make outlines for myself to practice from, like this:

The first system of music consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, in a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass line is mostly silent, with a few notes appearing in the later measures.

5

The second system, starting at measure 5, shows the melody continuing with eighth and quarter notes. The bass line becomes more active, providing a steady accompaniment. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

9

The third system, starting at measure 9, continues the melodic and harmonic development. The treble clef features a mix of quarter and eighth notes, while the bass clef maintains a consistent rhythmic pattern. The system concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

13

The fourth system, starting at measure 13, shows the final phrase of the piece. The melody in the treble clef reaches its conclusion with a final cadence. The bass line also ends with a clear resolution. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

If you're like me, and you cheated in the reading of this article and skipped to the end to see what the "real" music sounds like, just *nota bene*: one voice in each hand, bass line in the feet!

This is a useful way to introduce a new hymn. Nothing like hearing each phrase 3 times to make you feel like singing it. You can also use fugal exposition as the framework for a chorale prelude. Stay tuned for that one!